

Why Teachers Must Join the Fight for Public Education. Now.

Anissa Weinraub, Teacher Action Group- Philadelphia

We are at a tipping point in Philadelphia.

I say this as a teacher, fully committed to the promise of public education for all the young people living in this city I love, who has felt the repeated stab of the School District's systemic dysfunction and the State and City's structural abandonment.

I say this as a teacher activist, who is engaged in the community-wide fight for public education. I am a part of Teacher Action Group-Philadelphia (TAG) a member-run grassroots organization of educators working to strengthen our influence on the decisions that most affect us – how schools are run, funded, and governed – so that community control, equity, and fairness are back at the center of public education.

I say this as a community member, voter, and taxpayer, who is incensed by the political games being played to advance a neoliberal agenda that seeks to dispossess students of their right to a quality education and safety, communities of their public institutions and neighborhood stability, and workers of their hard-earned wages and workplace protections.

Indeed, we are at a tipping point where parents, students, teachers, and community members can no longer trust in a fantasy that the State, City, or School District have our best interests in mind. We are waking up to see, instead, that the priorities of our so-called leaders are not our priorities, and therefore we find ourselves forced to take a stand and work collectively in ways that are very new to all of us.

The Wake-Up Call

Here are a few snapshots of our most recent wake-up call:

- On March 7th, 2013, contrary to the direct opposition of thousands of parents, students, educators, and citizens across the city, the School District voted to close 23 schools in majority Black and Brown, working-class neighborhoods across Philadelphia, with another added to the list later in spring, bringing the number to 24.
- On May 30th, 2013, against its own recognition of the harm it would cause hundreds of thousands of children in Philadelphia, the School District voted to pass a "Doomsday Budget" that would essentially eliminate all counselors, assistant principals, support staff, classroom aides, secretaries, art, music, sports, paper, books, planning time, and the list goes on, in every single school across the city.
- On June 7th, 2013, knowing full well the impossibility of running a school with only a principal and some teachers, the School District sent out layoff notices to 3,783 teachers and staff members, eviscerating school communities and rendering them unable to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of students.

These are just a few of the most recent decisions made by our School Reform Commission (SRC), the appointed body who rubberstamps the operations of the School District of Philadelphia. Indeed, these decisions amount to a calculated and continued acquiescence to the corporate education reform agenda by a body installed 12 years ago by then-Governor Republican Tom Ridge (of George W. Bush's Homeland Security fame) to 'manage' our underwater District. Despite the promise of fiscal responsibility, the reform agenda has since driven us into an unprecedented budget deficit.

Indeed, under colonial-style State-control, our city school system is facing a manufactured fiscal crisis, ushered in through decades of inequitable funding, massive debt service, unfettered charter school expansion, and incredible mismanagement. The state and city are using this crisis as justification to continue its 'shock and awe' tactics of mass school closings, continued privatization of schools, and the gutting of nearly 20% of all the people who work every day in schools with our city's young people.

Politicking with Children's Lives

And how does this new political economy of urban education shake out where it really matters, with the hundreds of thousands of children desperately trying to get an education?

Until my most recent layoff – yes, I am one of the nearly 4,000 faces of the layoffs – I was teaching English and Expressive Arts at Bartram High School in Southwest Philadelphia, a school educating mostly African and African American, low-income teenagers.

Without wanting to fall into the stereotypes of “the comprehensive neighborhood school,” often painted by outsiders without any relationships within those schools, it is still important to recognize that the strains of generational poverty and institutional racism have a very real effect on my students. They face having parents who are incarcerated, jobs that are scarce, housing that is shoddy, drugs being sold nearby, STD rates skyrocketing, healthcare that is unaffordable, and bullets being fired outside their windows. Many of my students are living with very real trauma, few opportunities, and very little room to make a mistake. And yet they are deeply funny, smart, insightful, compassionate, talented, and critical of the world around them. They are indeed resilient. And normal. And extraordinary. Just like teenagers in schools all across our city.

Working with my 11th and 12th grade students, I can see without a doubt the consequences of the past 13 years of NCLB’s accountability-without-resources policies, the push toward deprofessionalizing teaching and standardizing learning, and the sophistication of the mechanisms and infrastructure of the school-to-prison pipeline. By and large the curriculum my students generally face (the curriculum that many of my colleagues are mandated and resigned to teach) does not ask them to think with the freedoms and creativity needed for deep academic engagement. They have to endure hours of mind-numbing test-prep during class time, and days of high-stakes testing for weeks of the year. They have been socialized into low-order tasks, the very stuff of their schooling, and mistaking that for education. Many thirst for something more, but they often get shut down by the brick wall of boredom or a punitive reaction against them “acting out.” Mix that with a heightened school culture of criminalizing and policing them, and there’s no wonder why so many of our young people have become increasingly alienated from their own educations.

Said plainly, they have not had the educational opportunities that many of their peers across the country, or even just 10 miles outside the city, have had. Not because they don’t deserve it, but because their very real needs have been overlooked and deemed unimportant by those who write the budgets. They are being consigned to failure.

In Philadelphia in 2013, as the Governor, State Legislature, City Council, and Mayor all slash the funding that our kids need and deserve, and then try to balance their budgets on the backs of our students’ lives, our school communities, and the future of our city, their abandonment of democratic responsibility is egregious.

Theirs is a failure of leadership. And we are going to have to be the ones to wrestle back control.

The Growing Movement

This crisis has been caused by the misplaced priorities of profit over people which have thus far dominated our elected officials’ economic and political decisions, and it is up to all of us – parents, students, teachers, and citizens – to work together with a common vision to change our schools so that they serve and prepare all of our young people for their lives today and tomorrow. More than ever, we need the next generations of young people to be receiving real educations in safe and healthy schools, where they can build their skills and come up with creative ideas to solve the problems of the world they are inheriting.

And that’s why I say we’ve reached our tipping point. We must pay attention, connect the dots, and not sit idly by while politicians, hedge fund managers, eduphilanthropists, and other corporate ‘experts’ dismantle public education forever. Too much is at stake.

That is why we’re seeing a growing movement take shape in Philadelphia. Thousands have been engaged in public protest – from student-led school walkouts to citywide pickets, from the takeover of many public meetings to hunger strikes. Thousands more have been involved in crafting a community-based plan for the future of our school system. And thousands more have been reached through community organizing strategies – petitions, campaigns for directed political pressure, local community meetings, doorknocking, online hubs like facesofthelayoffs.org and #phillyeducation #underattack, and through everyday conversations between actual stakeholders.

We are, indeed, building the political awareness, shared consciousness, and ongoing strategies for a broad base of Philadelphians to get involved in engaging with the fight for community control of our public education system, and, ultimately, in determining the future direction of our city.

Fighting Back as Teachers

At the Teacher Action Group, we are working to cultivate teacher leaders who can participate to shape the fight in multiple ways – in our classrooms, in our schools, and in the broader community. We are continuing to develop a broad membership of reflective, dynamic, and aware educators who possess a strong political analysis and the tools for collective action. TAG's work spans peer professional development through our political education programs, collective study groups, and public events; advocating and building coalition through Decarcerate PA and the Philadelphia Coalition Advocating for Public Schools; and direct organizing campaigns across the city and in individual schools. After a few years trying to teach, organize, and fight back to save our public school system, we have learned vital lessons that underscore our work. The following is a synthesis of what we've learned:

We need a positive agenda.

We have to get honest that our public schools have been under-serving and miseducating our young people and their communities for decades. To merely call for 'saving our schools' or 'stopping privatization' doesn't speak to the larger need for an overhaul of our schools in order to be sites of democracy and fairness. We need to stop the corporate takeover, yes, but it can't all just be reactionary; we need to be working to build a positive vision for what schools can look like. When we place the issues that our students, their families, and our colleagues care about at the center (like curriculum, true safety, and restorative approaches to discipline), then we'll be able to create stronger alliances among us all.

We need new leadership.

From the State's shameful budget priorities, to the City's unwillingness to fight for the funding our students deserve, to the District's complicity in the decimation of our public schools – our leaders have failed and abandoned us. Therefore, true leadership is going to have to come from us. The sooner we get clear that no one is coming to save us, and, in fact, that so many are here to harm us with their political brinksmanship, we will have a much better chance taking back control at all levels. We need to realize our own power to push elected officials to make different decisions, or we need to elect them out of office and grow the kinds of leaders who will.

We need to understand the larger picture.

What we're seeing is an extension of a privatization agenda bought and paid for by some of the richest individuals in our nation. We need to do our homework to understand who is pulling the purse strings and shaping the destruction of public education; who is coming in from outside our city to engage in modern-day carpet-bagging, dispossessing our young people of their right to a quality education; and, who is getting money and favor while our poor children are relegated into substandard, under-resourced schools.

Further, we need see the decimation of public education in the larger political economic context of contemporary United States where private interests are aiming to break the strength of all types of public sector unions nationwide, eliminate well-paying jobs by downsizing and forcing lower wages, and usher in the hand-over of public services to private companies.

We need to work with a framework of Anti-Racism.

Fifty-nine years after Brown vs. Board of Education, we in Philadelphia are still facing the continuation of the historic fight for civil rights. We must rekindle the fight for racial justice and push back against this current form of segregation and its locking-in of a tiered system of education where it is a privilege to go to functioning schools. From the systematic disinvestment in low-income Black and Brown neighborhoods to the criminalization and disproportionate incarceration of people of color, our students and communities exist within a broader landscape of institutionalized racism. Therefore, to build the alliances we need in order to build the world we want, our work must be grounded in the larger project of fundamentally changing these systems of power. This means grounding our work across issues – like linking the funding of the prison system to the defunding of our school system, pushing back against the increased profiling and breaking apart of our immigrant students' families, and supporting neighborhood efforts for community control of land use to stop gentrification and the displacement of our students' families.

We need to see ourselves as organizers.

Let's be honest. Most of us didn't become teachers because we wanted to organize against international capital and neoliberal elites; most of us love young people, the joys of discovery, and getting better at teaching and learning. Unfortunately, the truth of this moment is that there is a coordinated agenda to strip our city's neighborhoods of their public schools and force our students' (and our own) 'failure' as a justification for their takeover. To stop this agenda, we are going to have to build up the numbers of people actively involved, make demands that force the hands of decision-makers, and ultimately shift the power structures in our education system. This means thinking of ourselves in new ways to bring our colleagues, students, and school communities into the fight: injecting new ideas into our staff meetings and building committees, helping facilitate empowered spaces for youth voice in our schools, connecting people we have relationships with to the larger movement that we're growing, and choosing curriculum that connects our classrooms to the larger issues affecting Philadelphia.

Public Schools Mean Our Schools

We have reached the tipping point. A movement is growing in Philadelphia, and teachers are a part of it. Teacher Action Group will continue our work to develop the kinds of teacher leaders who are engaged in the fight at every level, so that we can look back and see that the Summer of 2013 was indeed the moment when the levees broke, we awoke the sleeping giant of community power in Philadelphia, and parents, students, teachers and community members reclaimed control over our public schools.

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Check out TAG's work: @TAGPhilly and www.tagphilly.org and www.facesofthelayoffs.org

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